

# An analysis of language learning and maintenance embedded in the life stories of Korean and Japanese advanced learners of English

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## 1. Introduction

One of the keywords in the 21st century is 'globalization'. At this time, the demand for English ability has been increasing more and more. English ability in Japan as well as Korea is advancing respectively at this time. Both Korea and Japan are choosing to teach English as the first foreign language for the purpose of communication. Because Japan is geographically located remote from English-speaking countries, English learning is centered on schools (Midorikawa, 2006). However, there are many students mainly interested in how-to approach in the learning of English in Japan. According to the average scores of TOEIC among Asian countries, Korean was rated 22nd, with 535 points and Japan 25th, with 457 points, both relatively low. (Report on Worldwide Test Takers ETS 2005; R & D Training Center, 2008) This indicates that it is difficult for Japanese and Korean learners to acquire English ability. How do advanced English learners in Korea and Japan acquire their language abilities?

## 2. Purpose of the Study

This study was undertaken to investigate how Korean and Japanese advanced learners of English approach English language learning, acquisition, attrition, and maintenance, by analyzing their life stories from the first contact of English until the present. The study also focused on how they have experienced the relevance of language learning, such as conflict, struggle, awareness and turning points. The study attempts to reveal their learning history of English. By analyzing the changes that occurred among the advanced learners, it is expected that important clues for effective English teaching methods may be identified.

## 3. Method

- 1) Time of investigation: Aug.-Nov., 2011
- 2) Interviewees: 3 Japanese and 3 Korean advanced learners of English, 20~40 years old, (4 males and 2 females.) were selected after interviewing 20 people by considering the depth of their transcribed data
- 3) Interview: Semi-structured interview

## 4. Results and Discussion

First, the results of the background of English education were ascertained. Both Japan and Korea have difficulty in learning English, and there is almost no difference in English proficiency yet. The

level of interest and motivation for learning English has been found higher in Korea than in Japan.

In addition, it was also found that it takes considerable effort to reduce the time from 2,760 to 2,400 hours for both Japanese and Koreans to learn English. (Expected Levels of Absolute Speaking Proficiency in Languages Taught at the Foreign Service Institute, 1973)

The stories of three Koreans and three Japanese also revealed the following four points of commonality in the process of learning English to the present day from past experience.

- 1) The accumulated time to be able to express ideas and necessities, and consciousness of their existence in English when living in foreign countries.
- 2) The accumulated time to understand another cultures and learn how to express themselves when immersed in the local community.
- 3) The accumulated time to make local friends and to speak English naturally.
- 4) The accumulated time required to maintain their English ability after returning to their homeland.

Therefore, learning and acquiring communication skills, negotiating skills and English language as well, help to understand the situation and estimate various communicative situations. With such ability, in English or Japanese, language acquisition is enhanced. Interestingly, there found a clear difference between Japanese and Korean advance learners in terms of cultural awareness. Korean culture has a reverence for English, including understanding and acceptance and gratitude for learning English and English culture. English means more in Korean life, and society as a means to connect people with the English culture.

For Japanese, contrastively, English is just a tool of communication mainly to achieve their objectives, even with somewhat negative feelings by inferiority complex toward the English culture. As a result, they do not recognize the turning point in their lives, even in English culture. This means that Japanese believe they tend to seek for better by not paying attention to the turning point in learning English. Japanese seem to develop their motivation for learning English abroad when much experience in interacting with people is involved.

The above points could be desirably promoted in a rather systematic and structured curriculum.